

Views of
Neverlight and *The Fearless Man*
novels of the Vietnam War

Suppose twenty or thirty marines are walking toward a treeline. They are arrayed in a line-abreast and spread out with a three-yard interval between men. And suppose the treeline is a vivid green — dense, solid. Or seemingly solid. And the marines are advancing at a steady pace, impeded by the ankle-deep water and the soft muck beneath. They are crossing a rice paddy in still, hot air. The muck in the paddy is hot.

Among the marines are a Navy lieutenant and his radioman, Lance Corporal Griffin of the Marine Corps. These two, the lieutenant and Griffin, control the naval guns. How efficiently they do their work could make the difference between success and suicide. So the marines are slogging forward — to the wall of green. There is another actor in this drama — a

destroyer lying off the coast, ten thousand yards over the right shoulders of the lieutenant, the radioman and the marines.

The lieutenant says to Griffin: “Tell the ship we’re moving toward the objective.” Griffin does so. After a pause he tells the lieutenant, “Sir, they say roger.”

“They” are the gunfire teams aboard the ship — the radar operators in combat information center, the gunner’s mates in the gun mounts and ammo handling spaces, the fire-control technicians at their computer, and the captain on the bridge, without whose consent nothing can happen.

If now we place ourselves in the mind of the lieutenant we find our focus narrowing, jumping left and right, searching for any disturbance or any little flash in the green barrier. We see and we know whatever the lieutenant knows (not much) about the green. Whatever he doesn’t know, we don’t know. Green, undisturbed, not even stirring in the breeze. There is no breeze.

Ankle-deep in the paddy water — pulling his feet out of the muck, remembering a marine whose boot sole was pulled off by the suction — the lieutenant proceeds at a pace matching the

pace of the marine on his right and the one on the left. He feels a strange, uplifting sensation. He is with these guys, they know him. He's the "Navy gunshot." At the moment he doesn't feel powerful with the power of the naval guns; he feels like one of the men in the line-abreast. It is an intense emotion. But he is also busy. He keeps scanning left and right. This could be bad, or it could be nothing much. He feels he has done this a thousand times. Actually this is his first. But he knows what he has to do — if.

There is no beginning. He had always expected a definite beginning. But there is no sound, only a tremor in the green. A breeze maybe. Then everything including his brain goes faster. He sees a dike three paces ahead and he shouts to Griffin, "Run!" Now he hears the machinegun fire. Splashing, lunging, the lieutenant and Griffin dive toward the dike and lie still for a moment while listening to the zipping overhead.

The lieutenant stands — a great wild sensation — and sees the vegetation trembling and the quick repetitive flashing within the green — no sound, just flashes. He is looking directly down

the muzzle of a gun that announces itself with *knock, knock, knock* — a fifty-calibre machinegun or the enemy equivalent, a Chicom 12.7 mike-mike.

While Griffin flattens his antenna along the top of the dike, so as not to draw attention, the lieutenant takes the handset. He aims his compass at the enemy gun, then lays the map over his knees, squatting, letting the black water run down the map, then works out the coordinates of the machinegun, which takes about thirty seconds.

He says to the ship: “Hickory this is Winter Wheat. Over”

And the ship: “This is Hickory. On station and ready for call for fire.”

The lieutenant: “*Target Number* five dash one.” These two words, “target number,” are loaded with dynamite. They mean “I am giving you a fire mission.”

“*Bearing* three five five degrees magnetic. *Coordinates* seven six seven four three eight. *Height* five meters. Active machinegun. Two guns, main armament, high explosive, fuze quick, will adjust. Over.”

After a pause, the ship: “*Gun target line two eight one degrees true, Ready five four. Set.*” So the projectiles will take fifty-four seconds to reach the neighborhood of the target.

The lieutenant rogers this and says: “Shoot.”

The ship, after a pause: “Shot, stand by — Out.” And from that “Out” the lieutenant has five seconds till impact. He counts to four and stands up, so he can observe the fall of shot and make his adjustments, but — what of the man firing the machinegun? *Knock, knock, knock.*

Standing — waiting — for a long second he sees no flashes, then — two massive eruptions of muck, rice stems, black and brown water — and a horrific noise, the crash of the impact, then the bark of the naval guns which now reaches his ears. This is all good. He had been worried that the rounds would land where he couldn’t see them. He squats, the fastest movement of his life.

He gives the handset back to Griffin, visualizes what he has just seen, thinks for half a second then says: “Left five zero, add one hundred.”

Griffin relays this to the ship. The lieutenant, over the next three minutes, makes three more adjustments, standing up each time, once feeling the rip of the air by his ear, and succeeds in bracketing the target. Then after one more adjustment: “Four guns, five salvos, fire for effect.”

And the air trembles, the trees shimmer and shake, the green wall rips itself to shreds as dirt, green limbs and mud fly, and the *knock knock knock* is heard no more.

After two minutes Griffin says, “Sir the gunny wants to know are you done?”

The lieutenant says he’s done. From several intervals to his left he hears the gunnery sergeant shout. The marines stand, a little tentatively. The line-abreast advances.

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A chaplain and a nurse were walking in the monsoon. She did not want him to leave, and the monsoon offered privacy. In its shelter she could beg him to stay. When they encountered somebody she retreated into her hood. The chaplain wore no hood or hat, he just let the “molecular rain” pour down on him. From time to time the atmosphere would change, and then the rain dropped down in heavy sheets, and the molecules were absorbed into the heavy “gravity water.” That is how Paul thought of the monsoon, benign molecules wafting in the breeze, or, in storms and spurts, water almost as thick as the air. Gravity water, he called it.

To the nurse the wind and water were a shelter. She needn't worry about anybody wanting to stop the chaplain or even greet him. And her chance of being recognized was minimal. The hospital where both worked, Alfa Med Forward, was recovering from a mass casualty event. The nurse, Rebecca Vanburen, lieutenant junior grade, US Naval Reserve, had just awakened from her first sleep in three days. On awakening she understood with new clarity that the chaplain loved her.

He, Paul Adriano, a Catholic priest, had just realized the same thing. He had seen her working to exhaustion, cutting the trousers off a man whose legs had been pulverized, bending over a “gorp,” a man turned gray and glazed in the eyes, calling to him, “Charles, Charles, I am a nurse, Becka, can you hear me Charles?”

Charles could not. Rebecca called a corpsman and said, “This man’s an Expectant,” and the corpsman made a face, then wheeled Charles off to the Parking Lot, where Paul Adriano administered the last rites.

During those endless hours of hunger, sleeplessness and desperate work, he watched her, admired her, and called on his true identity to come to his help — called on the man he had been until he saw her — for help now, right away. “I cannot,” he repeated in his mind, “I cannot.” He did not go so far as to ask God for help. God had more important business. Paul of his own free will had taken the vow of celibacy. Rebecca was under no such vow.

BECKA: Is it true that you’re leaving?

PAUL: Yes. I'm going back to the regiment.

BECKA: The same one as before?

PAUL: Yes.

BECKA: Why go back to the same unit? To prove something?

PAUL: If you like, to prove something.

BECKA: That you are not a coward.

PAUL: If people are saying I'm a coward they are wrong. I was, but am not now, a coward. Two months in this hell has driven the fear out of me.

BECKA: Stay here. We need you here.

PAUL: The marines in Delta Company need me too. If they welcome me, fine. If they call me a coward, fine. That's where I'm going, back to Delta.

BECKA: One minute of fear, two, three minutes, surly that isn't —

PAUL: A man was crying for help and I crouched in a hole and listened to him holler. I saw the tracers flying over my head. Was I supposed to stand up and go to him?

BECKA: You were not. It would have been suicide.

PAUL: No, it would have been my duty. Simple. Like a vow of celibacy. Perfectly simple. You cannot interpret your way out of it.

BECKA: What does the vow mean? Does it mean that you can't —

PAUL: Exactly, I can't.

BECKA: Ever?

PAUL: No, just for my lifetime.

She stopped and turned to face him. The wind took her hood and tore it back off her head.

BECKA: You could — maybe — help me a little.

PAUL: I doubt it, but tell me, what is your problem?

BECKA: Well — you saw me and the gray man, Charles. I felt you hovering over me, over him.

PAUL: I remember Charles. I wrote a letter to his family that same night.

BECKA: Right, you write letters to the next of kin. You talk to the men and tell them they'll live, then they die. Or

they're wrecked for life. It doesn't seem to change you, you carry on. But I do all I can, and it's grinding me down. A guy gets his hand blown off by his own grenade and I just think, 'O.K. bleeding, shock, sepsis, oxygen,' that's all I think. I'm there and I'm not there.

PAUL : You are caught in a struggle. Some day you'll be glad you did what you could.

BECKA: Oh I'm glad already but the more I do the emptier I get. We're on the side of the men, the other side is the death force. I should be getting stronger just because I'm on the right side. Tell me please, does your vow mean you can never get married?

PAUL : Yes.

BECKA: I would never say this back home but Paul!
Would you do it again?

PAUL: Yes. I am in this for life. And for the present this is my home, yours too.

BECKA: If you and I had met before, would you still take the vow?

PAUL: Of course, it is part of my vocation.

She cried, “Oh!” and pulled the hood back over her face.

They walked toward the door of Receiving. She started to go in but he stopped her.

PAUL: No, if I had known you then, I would never have taken the vow. I would have searched for a different path.

BECKA: Please don't go. Please stay.

PAUL: It's done. I leave tonight.

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Neverlight was published in hardback in 1982, with a paperback in '84. The hardback edition of *The Fearless Man* was published in 2004. Paperbacks came out in the U.S. and U.K. in 2005.